



A MICRO SOFT APPROACH TO COMMUNITY OUTREACH AT GRASS ROOT LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

The institutes like KG to PS across the countries have community outreach as a critical component of their off campus activities. Most of these programmes turn out to be a one shot affair with a hit and go appeared by the student campus. Initially a holistic survey of backward community where the student wish to initiate their outreach programme. Academic institutions Grampanchayats, NGOs, donea agencies and the Govt. may encourage this ancro soft approach in rural development as in essential component of every out of these institutions. UGC may strengthen the thend dimension of follow extension by encouraging all to the micro soft approach in their neighbor hood communities.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

Colleges and Universities across the countries have 'Community Outreach' as a critical component of their off campus activities. Shramdan, blood donation, population education, planting of seedlings, literacy, group formation, surveys, supplementary education, yoga, cultural programmes, leadership building, resource mobilization, awareness generation, motivation and counseling are source among the galaxies of programmes undertaken by the teachers and students during their camp in villages and slums.

Most of these programmes turn out be a one shot affair with a 'hit and go' approach by the student campers. Programmes with long term vision and lasting benefits to the community and an in built component of sustainability are very few and far between. In order to break this stereotype rural experience programme of millions of educational institutions across the globe, a new outreach methodology is suggested.

Strategy:

Survey: initially, a wholistic survey of backward community where the students wish to initiate their outreach programmes during a semester can be undertaken by the entire class or department. The survey fan focus upon the existing socio-cultural milieu and the problems confronting the community. For each problem identified by the community, a small group of about two or three persons from the local community, who are knowledgeable about the problem identified, can be requested to be the members of a Task Force constituted by the larger community. Students of a department from a college or a University can be grouped into a small team of two or three, based on the size of the community and magnitude of the problem identified by them for their outreach programme.

The problem: Similarly, a problem identified should be such that concerted efforts by a small team of people and students would help find solution in a short duration of about a few weeks or one or two months. Such problems could be either development/welfare oriented or social issue based, which affect the larger interests of the community. These problems should be such that they can be solved by giving representation, visiting government departments/ institutions, meeting officials/ experts and mobilizing local and external resources.

Task Force: Students who are either knowledgeable about or interested in tackling a particular problem can be made members of such committees. With an informed group of local community members and interested group of students, comprising about half a dozen from both the sides, can be entrusted with the task of solving the problems facing the community. Task forces should be formed for attacking common problems or those which affect a group or cluster of the community. Individual problems which are humane concern could also be taken up for redressal.

Involvement of CBOs: Constitution of various task force committees for solving a set of different problems should have the sanction of local Panchayat, self help groups or a youth club, so that it will derive greater strength and stability in its pursuits. Soon after the formation of such committees, a teacher or a faculty member with experience or expertise or interest in the intervention of a select problem may be made an advisor of such committees.

Guidance and Monitoring: Once this tripartite team is built up, the respective committees can meet on a particular day within the community. Teachers who can contribute their mite to more than one committee may do so at this meeting. The President or a Ward member or a Councilor, the head of the col-

lege/university or its department and wherever possible, the head of an NGO which has been operating in the local community may form the Guidance and Monitoring Team for all the task Force committees in a particular hamlet or village or a cluster. This team will guide, liaise and lead all the committees till they succeed in their mission.

Action Plan: On the day of meeting by all the communities in the community, every committee may come up with an Action plan of how to go about the entire process of tackling the problem identified. All the committees should provide answer to a common set of questions; what to do, where to do, when to do, how to do, for how long, who will do what, where to go, whom to meet, when to meet and the expenses required in executing the action plan. Whenever the team goes to meet officials, it is necessary that the students team takes the village representatives without fail. The question of cost sharing on such visits should have to be finalized on the day of formulating their action plan.

The experience of Gandhigram University:

Extension Education department of the Gandhigram Rural University constituted about half a dozen such committees for making sincere efforts towards solving six select problems identified by the local community in its rural neighborhood. Veterinary care for milch animals, energisation of pump-set for the community overhead tank, transportation to the nearby town, feasibility of starting a dairy cooperative for the self help groups, motivation of the women to use the local community toilet and depending of a local tank were the issues identified.

These tasks identified by the department in one of the service villages, were entrusted to specific Task Force committees constituted in the above manner. These tasks could be classified into three patterns. Tasks on feasibility study could be done by students and teachers themselves, including the local villages. Motivation of women for using the community toilet could be done by the students and the local leaders within the community. Veterinary care, energisation of pump sets, transportation, starting a dairy cooperative had to be done by visiting the respective government departments such as veterinary Department, electricity board, Transport Corporation, Cooperative Milk Union and Agriculture Engineering Department, while some problems could be solved within a few weeks, others took months, the problem of transportation defied any solution even after three months.

Normally, the students team was able to sort out the solutions to various problems they had identified initially. Experience of Gandhigram University shows that the various student teams achieved their mission by the end of a semester. Wherever it protracted, the same team continued its task in the next semester or handed over to their juniors if they were in their terminal year. Switching over from one village to the other by the end of a semester or a year is left to the college/university, depending upon how far they succeeded and now many problems await solution in the first village.

Assessment : Selection of villages and identification of problems depend on the type of courses pursued by the students. The interest of agriculture, veterinary, engineering, polytechnic, science or social science students will be bound to vary. Students involvement in the community outreach activities could be scheduled in weekends (if necessary including Fridays in a fortnight or a month) so as to enable the teams to visit government departments for taking up the issue.

Teacher advisors in the respective teams should train the students to document their work and allot credits for their labour, regardless of whether they solved the

problem or failed due to impediments from officials. The yardstick in judging the work of the student team should not be by its success but by the struggle they had put up in solving the problem.

REVIEW AND DOCUMENTATION:

There should be an opportunity to review the work of all the teams in the middle of their mission and towards the end. Periodic sharing and proper documentation of their efforts will pay rich dividends to the students and teachers both academically and in their actual life.

Relating the field experience of various teams in their reviews, with the teaching of theories in classroom by the teachers would make their education more lively and interesting. Such an experiment by all the college/universities will make education socially relevant and academically rewarding. Since the whole exercise is aimed at solution oriented field training at the micro level, it could be called as a micro soft approach (micro level, solution oriented field training).

CONCLUSION:

Academic institutions, village panchayats, NGOs, donor agencies, and the government may encourage this micro soft approach in such a way that it forms an essential component of every one of these institutions. University Grants Commission may strengthen the third dimension of extension, by encouraging all the colleges/universities to follow the micro soft approach in their neighborhood communities.